ON BEING A CIVIL SERVANT

The English, of course, know their duties. . . . I learned from them how to treat people, how to treat someone who wants something. I say to him that I am not his master. The government placed me to serve you. I don’t want to say that I am his servant, but that I serve his interests. If this person was good and polite, I had to help him regardless of his being a Muslim, a Jew, or a Christian. I lived on this basis.

Salim Rashid, Retired Civil Servant, Gaza City, 11 March 1999

Since I am a member of society, I have to demand of myself what I demand of people. . . . I was appointed to serve the people. I was not there to give orders “you come here” or “go there.” This is shameful, because there is dignity. I should respect him, for he is a citizen as much as I am. I’m there to help and serve him, not more, so good treatment is required.

Jamal Yusef, Retired Civil Servant, Gaza City, 3 May 1999

Civil servants, as much as the files they write and organize, are at the center of the bureaucratic process. Their effective operations are essential to both the work and authority of government. At the same time, these personnel, especially the rank-and-file ones who have pride of place in this discussion, often occupy an uncomfortable position. On the one hand, they are functionaries and representatives of a government or
administration. On the other, they are also members of the community which is being governed. They are served as much as they serve. They are both the face of government to a disgruntled public and members of that public who may be as dissatisfied as their clients. While such tensions can be found in bureaucracies of all types, they were accentuated by the circumstances in Gaza, where the relationship between government and the public was so uncertain and where the parties were so often at odds. As local hires employed by a foreign regime, and operating on a precarious fault line between public servant and private citizen, the personas and practices of Gazan civil servants were vital to the authorization and persistence of government.

The authority of personnel was articulated first and foremost at a small, even intimate, scale—in terms of character and reputation, of comparison with other civil servants, of relationships with the people being served. It was not only who these civil servants were that was important, but how they were—lest this personnel authority be mistaken for simply personal authority. Gaza’s civil servants also explicitly distinguished their work and their authority from the government in which they were employed. This separation made possible their own positive sense of their work and also kept this authority distinct from legitimacy. Civil service authority partly entailed carving out a space that distinguished its practice from other sorts of practice—personnel from personal, government from regime, authority from legitimacy.

To explore this civil service experience, it is necessary to understand who counted as a civil servant. This definition was, as we will see, a matter of some contention during both the British Mandate and the Egyptian Administration. To be a civil servant in Gaza did not always mean conforming to a classic image of a clerk sitting at a desk, surrounded by papers, receiving members of the public. Further, and increasingly over the time period considered here, it did not indicate with surety a person’s class or social status. When I told people in Gaza I wanted to meet retired civil servants, in addition to administrative employees, I was introduced to teachers, policemen, clerics, electricians, and nurses—a diverse array that highlights the breadth of the category. Being a civil servant in Gaza was primarily defined, it seems, not by the type of one’s job, but rather by the ethic, style, and benefits of one’s work. The difference that being a civil servant made for people was not limited to their work, but extended into all aspects of their lives.
Civil servants (muwazzafin) worked for government (and also for UNRWA: see below) and provided services to the public. They were institutionally distinguished from other workers (‘ummal) employed by government by their conditions of employment, namely, monthly pay, pension upon retirement, membership in a civil servants’ association. As one retiree put it to me, “The civil servant received his salary at the end of the month—meaning, for example, that he could buy on credit from stores and pay his bill when he was paid. Someone who wasn’t a civil servant couldn’t borrow money from others—if he worked he could buy food and eat. The life of the civil servant was different.” Civil servants were self-defined as being especially concerned with matters of respectability and duty.

During the Mandate, when the civil service was relatively small, it was largely the province of the upper-middle class. Palestinian society was highly stratified, and civil service status was part of the larger social condition. Civil servants were educated, wealthy, and cultured, and the job was a high-status position. According to ‘Arif al-‘Arif, a Gaza district officer during the Mandate and local historian, in 1943 the entire civil service in Gaza consisted of 2,775 people (the bulk policemen), of whom 162 were English and the rest Arabs. These numbers reflected a dramatic growth in the civil service during World War II. Over the course of the Egyptian Administration, as both educational opportunities and the ranks of the civil service expanded, its salaries diminished, as did the value attached to such employment. Civil servants were necessarily confronted with a certain amount of tension about how much they could, or should, be distinguished from the broader Gazan population. At the same time, differences of class, of training, and of salary distinguished the civil service not only from the public, but within itself. The diversity of civil service ensured that there was also considerable tension inside its ranks. All these tensions were part of the definition of civil service.

This chapter explores reflections upon and debates about this definition. The question of what a civil servant should be was a subject of considerable concern, both among muwazzafin themselves and in the broader public. These processes, which I term reflective habit, were themselves part of the formation and consolidation of bureaucratic authority. In the absence of a secure foundation for such authority, the habitual character of civil service played a particularly important role. It is a feature of bureaucracy that those parts of its work which appear the least creative, the least individual, and the
least exemplary are the aspects that lend it the most authority. In this instance it was also the focus on the work itself, rather than the regime that required it, that provided a means through which government could be disassociated from the nationality of the rulers.

Weber highlights the significance of habit in permitting bureaucracies to persist in the face of major disruptions, such as a change in regime, and even to survive the loss of the files. “However great the practical importance of administration on the basis of the filed documents may be,” he suggests that one cannot overlook “the settled orientation of man for keeping to the habitual rule and regulations that continue to exist independently of the documents.”

These habits and routines were not static or undifferentiated. Different locations, jobs, and times made a difference to people’s habits, to how they understood the proper character of a civil servant. Furthermore, as important as habit seems to be for bureaucracy in general, and as it has proven to be in the specific case of Gaza, it is not an indestructible force. Weber describes bureaucracy as “practically unshatterable,” but it is not entirely so. The ways in which doubt, the counterpart of habit, can enter into the workings of civil service illuminates the possibility, if not the probability, of noncompliance on the part of civil servants and civilians.

Habit, as C. S. Peirce understands it, can be “either a habit of action or a habit of thought.” Belief is a habit, one that both shapes and provokes actions. For civil servants in Gaza, belief in their work, commitment to their understandings of their personas, was certainly a habit of thought. This chapter focuses precisely on habits of belief, on ideas about good and bad work. The next chapter turns more directly to habits in/of action, looking at the ways in which habits are inculcated through the practice of civil service work. As we will see, civil service habits, being at least partially inculcated even before one was hired and lasting long beyond retirement, exceeded the moments of a career. Civil servants’ discussions about the nature of this work are also part of the process of producing and reinforcing these habits.

Reflective Habits and Memory Processes

With its emphasis on experience and practice, this chapter draws heavily on conversations I had with retired civil servants. In addition to innumerable casual conversations, I tape-recorded interviews with people who worked in,
or had experiences with, both the British Mandate and the Egyptian Administration. These conversations are not easily classifiable. They straddle the divide—to the extent that there is one—between the historical and the ethnographic. They are part oral history, recollections of people's lives and work in earlier moments, and part evaluative reflections on what government should be and how people understood themselves. These conversations, then, both provide evidence about habit and are part of habit formation itself.

This is what I mean when I refer to habits of belief as reflective habit. Contrary to common conceptions of habit as a space of nonreflection (as in fact relying on an absence of active thought), the civil service habits I trace here are deeply embedded in contemplations on the nature of service and its practice. The bodily practices of bureaucratic work—the act of filing, the scripted interactions with the public—and its reflective practices—the development of a sense of oneself as a public servant, the elaboration of notions like good work, respectability, and duty—are profoundly interconnected.

Understanding the meaning and power of civil service requires attending to this relation.

In style and in content, my conversations with retired civil servants were clearly part of the practice of reflective habit. Respectfulness, pride, and duty, important features of civil service experience and habit, loomed large in the ways former civil servants interacted with me. In this twofold expression, the continuities between thought and action were manifest, as were the connections between my probings and their own concerns. Before I started conducting interviews, I was not certain how my queries would be received by people. I did not expect hostility, but I thought that perhaps the intensity of the national problem in people's experience would make my project, which did not focus on this struggle, seem irrelevant. What I found, to my pleasure, was that even as people were interested in what a book on Gaza might do for their cause, they were also deeply engaged (entirely apart from me) in their own processes of reflecting on the workings of government, the significance of its mundane routines, and the effects of its demands on people.

I talked with people in a variety of settings, including homes, offices, and the outdoors. Interviews conducted in people's homes were most likely to involve other participants, as family members gathered around to hear what
they had to say. I had ongoing relationships with many of the people with whom I had tape-recorded conversations; other people I met only for the interview. Judging from those people whom I knew well, the concerns and evaluations expressed in formal interviews extended into ordinary life. I also learned something about civil service experience from the locations of my interviews. I spoke with one former UNRWA teacher sitting between rows of peas growing in the small plot of land he had purchased with the money he received at retirement. I interviewed many people in the offices of the Retired Civil Servants’ Association and the Retired Arab UNRWA Employees’ Association, places where retirees, now that they no longer had offices to go to, spent their days drinking coffee, playing backgammon, and arguing about politics. For a conversation with Khalil Rishad, a retired director of Diwan al-Muwazzafin (Civil Service Commission), he and I were given the use of the office of the Pension Administration’s director, a courtesy that reflected Khalil’s status as a former high-ranking official. Each of these settings—and the variety of homes where I met people, in refugee camps, in cities, and in towns—afforded its own insight into the working histories of these former civil servants.

The narrative expressions, evaluations, and recollections articulated in conversations I had with people in Gaza constitute an interpretative moment within the memory process. Conceiving of memory as a process reminds us that there is no inherent object that is falsified over time, or by politics (which is not to say that there cannot be false memories). In the case of Gaza, the intense politics of the place and the multiple ruling authorities who have influenced the civil service complicate civil service memories. When former civil servants spoke about their work during the Mandate or the Administration, they frequently made explicit comparisons with the Israeli occupation or the Palestinian Authority, and sometimes with Ottoman practice. The various administrations were judged in relation to and in terms of each other. The practice of narrative imbrication necessarily complicates, but does not invalidate, the use of these interviews in an analytical project that focuses on the first two administrations. That people have something to say about the present does not mean they don’t have anything to say about the past.

At the same time, just because people are silent about something does not
mean it is unimportant.\footnote{17} With the tape recorder rolling, for instance, people were often reluctant to criticize the Palestinian Authority. Even though my research was not about the Authority, people wanted to make sure that I would not use their names (I am not) and that I was not a journalist who was going to put their words in the newspaper the next day. This concern, while pervasive, did not engender a complete narrative absence, but rather a narrative thinness. In casual conversation criticism never ceased, and it did sometimes make its way into interviews. There is no doubt, however, that concern about the Authority’s security forces influenced people’s talk.

Other narrative absences reflected more complicated social phenomena. For example, when I raised the question of relations between native Gazans and refugees, people tended to gloss over problems and discrimination. It seemed clear to me that this reluctance stemmed from a concern that I not think there was disunity or internal discord among Palestinians, who were supposed to be united in struggle after all. Of course, it was only because enough people told me about the complexity of the relations between Ghazzazwa (native Gazans) and refugees that I was able to interpret this narrative thinness in this way.\footnote{18} My own understandings of Gazans’ reflections on civil service experience rely both on an accumulation of conversations and on the multiplicity of perspectives on these reflections that I acquired throughout my research (in archives, in newspapers, in local histories, and so forth). That is, my account of the memories and evaluations of civil servants is also part of the interpretive process.

**The Sense of Service: Reflections on Practice and Character**

In my conversations with civil servants, we talked a lot about what it meant to be a good muwazzaf, and conversely what might constitute bad work. In implicitly or explicitly comparing their work to that of other civil servants or to civil service in other times, the retirees I knew in Gaza not only defined themselves, but also offered clear arguments about what government should be. At times, people suggested that the work they did in the Mandate was an improvement over conditions during the preceding Ottoman regime. At other times, they drew contrasts between Egyptian service and the humiliations of Israeli occupation or the corruption of the Palestinian Authority. Retired civil servants’ evaluations of rule also sometimes felt to me like
suggestions for the future—how a Palestinian state might best be able to serve its people. Gaza’s muwazzafin did not create their ideas about service sui generis. They were schooled in Ottoman, British, and colonial traditions of service that shaped the contours of their definitions. These broad notions both helped people cope with the difficult conditions in Gaza and were themselves inflected with Gaza’s particularities. Being respectable and respected, doing one’s duty, working with efficiency and sympathy, distinguishing oneself within the community, these were all features of the complicated and sometimes contradictory definition of good civil service work.

**IN SERVICE TO DUTY: DOING GOOD FOR NATION, FAMILY, AND SELF**

The widespread agreement among muwazzafin that service was a duty lent their work importance, even if the details of their job seemed trivial. Sense of duty was also connected to civil servants’ production of themselves as authoritative subjects. It permeated civil servants’ idea of themselves, of their work, and of their lives. At the same time, ideas about duty were remarkably concrete and often instrumental. Some people linked this work with their obligations to the community, but just as many highlighted their responsibility to their families and their need to earn a living. This instrumentality distinguishes duty from the much more general ideas about respectability that were also crucial to civil service self-perception. One might choose to take the job for a specific, even narrow purpose. But once a civil servant, one had to embody that persona. Varying reasons for taking the job did not seem to produce diverse senses of what civil service should mean.

Those who defined their duty entirely as service to community and nation tended to be wealthy, people whose families did not depend on their monthly salary. Most women who worked in service during the Mandate were from this class, people for whom a job as a teacher (the most common option for women) was a means of doing good, rather than a way of earning a living. A former teacher who now runs a charitable society for women described the purpose of her work: “I never thought of money. I thought of how to serve my people . . . to serve my people and to serve my women.” Another teacher, Hanan, said almost the same thing: “I was concerned for the people, I loved the people and I still love them now. . . . I liked my job, and it was a
hobby more than an employment.” For these civil servants, duty to serve the people was perceived as a form of charity, an obligation on the part of the well-to-do to those less fortunate than themselves. To this extent, duty was implicated in the distinctions that civil service produced in the community.

Given the extreme impoverishment most Gazans faced after 1948, it is not surprising that most people who began their civil service careers during the Egyptian Administration accorded as much importance to their duty to their families as to their duty to community. Ahmed Ismail, who worked first as a laborer and then as a clerk for UNRWA, explained that even though he was educated, he was willing to take any job to support his family: “I was the only person who could take care of the family. What to do? I thought that the best thing was to find a job, but from where?” He submitted more than sixty applications to UNRWA before finally receiving a summons from the director, who told him that the only available position was a job as a laborer in a rations distribution center, a position far below his qualifications: “He said, ‘Do you know what I mean by laborer?’ I told him, ‘Yes, I know, I see the laborers when I go to the distribution center [to get my monthly rations]. I told him, ‘I want to work.’” Convinced that Ahmed was willing, the director gave him the job. Then, he recounted, “I worked as a laborer, but I determined that I accept for now and would be a hard worker and obey my bosses, and I could also help them in clerical work.” Ahmed’s hard work paid off, and he was appointed to a clerical position within a short time. He received steady promotions throughout his career and retired as a field distribution officer. He stressed that his duty to his family was the impetus behind his success: “My family situation required me to work hard and strive to bring my family into safety and security.”

Working in the civil service afforded people a salary with which to feed their families, but it seemed also to transform their experience of loss. By enabling muwazzafin to be active in improving people’s living conditions, rather than being passive recipients of relief, civil service mitigated the humiliation they might have felt about their desperate conditions. There is no doubt that, especially after 1948, public services were vital to many people’s survival. Da’ud Ahmed certainly understood his work as a clerk in the Egyptian Administration in these terms. He described his feelings of humiliation in 1948 and explained that while he needed work to help his family—
“my family thought of me as a savior”—once employed he focused on his ability to effect change for other people: “We saw how people were living, and we tried hard to ease these bad conditions. It was a responsibility to serve my community through my job and to work honestly in this regard.” Reflecting a different attitude from those who saw civil service as charity, Da’ud emphasized the equality of the service relation: “I was put in this job to serve the people, not to control or humiliate them.” Whatever the disparities in their attitudes toward the people, civil servants were in agreement that they and their work deserved respect. Evidence suggests that this conception was widely shared, that civil servants’ self-constitution as authoritative subjects contributed to their authority. Respectability was one of the terms through which civil service authority was translated into everyday interactions.

Respectability and Civil Service Etiquette

Everybody in Gaza told me that civil servants had to be respectable—respectful in their dealings with people, worthy of receiving their respect, and well mannered in their life. This was a habit that defined civil servants and provided a grounds for judging them. Respectability both indexed and produced their authority. To be deemed respectable, the smallest details of one’s interactions mattered. Ibrahim Mahmoud, who retired as a school principal, explained his view of this etiquette. A civil servant, he said, “should have taste and good morals. I come to you, for example, you should offer me a cup of coffee. You can’t greet me without a kind word. So, I drink something better than this cup of coffee [this small gesture goes a long way].” Treating people right, easing their encounter with government, was perceived as an essential part of civil service respectability. Reflecting on his own experience in civil service, Salim Rashid gave prominence to his style of dealing with people: “I learned from them [the British] how to treat people. . . . I don’t want to say that I am his servant, but I serve his interests. If this person was good and polite, I have to help him, regardless of his being a Muslim, a Jew, or a Christian.”

While Salim did not suggest that only civil servants were respectable—and civilian respectfulness was clearly important to him—he did intimate that respectability was intrinsic to civil service in a way that was not true for the general population. He did not imagine that all civil servants lived up to
these standards, but he viewed such failures as having serious consequences: “If you behaved in your work in a good manner, straight, the people will respect you. . . . It is up to you. You have to prove yourself in society as a civil servant. There are civil servants who retired without anyone mentioning them and there are others in high-ranking positions, but nobody says good morning to them.”26 Being perceived as respectable could bring concrete benefits to civil servants. That is, it was an effective habit, one that could engender habits of respect in other people.27

At the same time, a lack of respectability could affect not only one’s position in society, but also one’s ability to advance at work. Muhammad Ghazi, a clerk in the Egyptian-era health department, attributed his success to his distinction from other, less respectable employees: “Some employees had bad habits. Some drank coffee at their desks, some talked, some smoked cigarettes, this was not me. I progressed a lot, even compared to the employees who had seniority over me.”28 Respectable behavior also made the work itself go more smoothly. In his accounts of events at work, Salim stressed that he accomplished his goals “through sweet speech and logic and not through shouting or fighting. . . . When the employee shouts and raises his voice, he gets a headache. . . . Through understanding everything works out—it depends on the mentality of the muwazzaf.”29 Salim noted the effects of behavior—the instrumental aspect of respectability—yet he also believed respectability to be its own reward. As a civil servant, one should be respectable, not just because it will help achieve some immediate end, but because that is what it means to be a civil servant. Respectability participated in the consolidation of the authority of civil service personnel, creating grounds for public respect and suggesting the contours of interactions.

**DISTINCTION: BENEFITS OF AND TENSIONS IN SERVICE**

The distinctions that went along with civil service reflect some of its internal contradictions. Along with respectability came high social status, a distinct benefit of government work and evidence of the successful inculcation of its habits. The status accorded civil servants in Palestine was an accumulation of attitude over time. The Ottoman origins of the Palestinian civil service created new forms of education and training that distinguished civil servants within the broader society.30 When British officials considered employment
in their version of this service, they looked to hire people with service histories in their families, thereby ensuring that a sense of civil service status would extend beyond the confines of any one job. The expansion of civil service during the Administration, which made these positions much less rarified, risked undermining, though not eliminating, this special status.

Even as civil servants appreciated this benefit, these social distinctions created a certain amount of tension within and around civil service, in part because, in contrast to conditions of patronage, occupation, or corruption, civil service interactions were supposed to take place among equals. Many former civil servants stressed precisely this equality in describing their relations with the public. As Bahat Hassan put it, “We had values, principles, obligation, respect, and compliments. The employee was not a tyrant. Civil servants are ordinary people who respect all people. His salary doesn’t make him a high-class person.” In this view, service should be neither servitude nor domination.

Many civil servants, though, enjoyed a sense of superiority. This superiority was linked to class differences and was most often expressed by the same people who viewed their work as a form of charity. Reflecting on her work during the Mandate, the teacher Hanan commented that “the Southern District—the Gaza Strip and the south—was less civilized. . . . Education in the rest of Palestine was more advanced.” Despite the fact that she herself is from Gaza, Hanan, being the daughter of a powerful, well-known man and highly educated, most definitely did not include herself in this evaluation. Her sense of distinction from the people around her was even stronger when she discussed the refugees who came to Gaza in 1948: “The refugees who came to the Strip were from the most backward class in Palestine. . . . The villages—and I am an urban person [madaniyya]—there was a big difference between a village in the north and a village in the south.” In addition to a north-south distinction, Hanan highlighted the difference between urban and rural life—and firmly identified the former as superior. Hanan insisted that her superiority did not undermine her service work, but those on the receiving end might have disagreed.

Distinction did sometimes create tensions with the broader public. Rachelle Taqqu notes, in a dissertation about Arab workers during the Mandate, that when local civil servants “adopted British manners, they some-
times set themselves apart from the rest of the population.” Even as people respected and accorded status to civil servants, there was some resentment about “the ‘professional’ pose assumed by many government employees.” There was also resentment within the ranks of the civil service about internal class distinctions. As one retiree, Abu Jamal, complained to me, “Junior employees had low salaries, and the senior employees had high salaries and were indifferent to the plight of junior employees and unconcerned about increasing their salaries.” These sorts of tensions never developed into out-and-out conflict, but they were a persistent feature of civil service experience.

Still, even civil servants who were not from the upper class benefited from service distinctions, and many remember their high social status fondly. People recall that in the British Mandate, “We were the top.” A former teacher described how association with teachers was enough to raise the status of others: “Someone who wanted to be notable, during Ramadan he invited the teachers to show that he has a connection. So, the people say, ‘Oh! Oh, the teachers are coming to the home of fulan [so-and-so].’” During the Egyptian Administration, one retiree (Abu Jamal) commented to me, “the civil servant felt comfortable and everybody wanted his daughter or sister to marry a civil servant because he earned a good and steady salary. When a civil servant wanted to become engaged to somebody, her family immediately agreed; they said that this employee will get a dunam [plot of land] in the future and his salary is good.” In large part because of a devaluation in civil service salaries, such high status is a thing of the past, and Abu Jamal went on to lament that today “people hesitate when an employee wants to marry their daughter, even if he has good morals and conduct, but when an uneducated day-worker wants to marry, they agree immediately.”

Distinction both created and was a characteristic of tension in civil service. Bureaucratic authority seemed to depend on the presence of both “equality” and “social differentiation” in civil service practice. There were, that is, multiple sources of authority which were both interrelated and mutually dependent. That civil servants made claims about approaching their clients as equals afforded the civil service a certain amount of moral authority. That they sometimes approached these clients from a position of higher status gave them social authority. This was in addition, of course, to the legal authority that their office gave them. The relations among these sorts of
authority were complex, and they did not necessarily form a coherent whole. Bureaucratic authority appeared to depend on keeping this variety of relations in constant play.

**Bad Habits: The Other Side of Civil Service**

One of the factors that had to be accounted for in this variety was the possibility of poor work—“bad habits”—among civil servants. Even as civil servants articulated their expectations of themselves and others in their position, and even as they asserted that these expectations were not simply ideals but rather the practiced habits of civil service, they were cognizant of failures. People more often talked about the bad habits of other people, other departments, or other regimes than about their own. That civil servants were vehement in their objections to perceived misbehavior by colleagues could serve to further underscore the importance of civil service virtues as well as the commitment of most civil servants to maintaining them. These reflections on the boundaries of good behavior also served as a reminder that habit was not stasis: it required work, reflection, and active participation.

While my conversations with retirees about failures to behave up to standard took place long after the fact, archival records indicate that working civil servants did make formal complaints about their colleagues when they disapproved of their practices (and perhaps when they saw personal advantage in slowing someone else’s career trajectory). In 1947, Mustafa Bseiso, the shari’a advocate of Gaza wrote to the attorney general, complaining about the work habits of a colleague in the Gaza court. The attorney general forwarded the complaint to the chief secretary, who asked the Supreme Muslim Council to investigate.40 The petition both presumed and described a whole order of work, which Bseiso thought was being undermined by the irresponsibility of one civil servant: “[He] inquires whether the regulations governing hours of attendance in Government offices do not apply to officers of the Supreme Muslim Council and the Sharia Courts who arrive late in the morning and absent themselves whenever they like, while the public wait to pay their fees. For instance, Sheikh Adel Shareef, Chief Clerk at the Sharia Court, Gaza, often arrives late unheedful of the hours of attendance. On Saturday the 12th July, 1947, he arrived after 11 a.m., while he often has a haircut and invites guests to eat and drink with him during office hours in the office behind
closed doors, while people are waiting outside to finish their business.”

Bseiso identified timeliness, regularity, and equality of treatment as crucial to office order. Petitions such as this one, even as they complained about poor civil service performance, reinforced the importance of good habits. Making its way from one government office to another, the petition became a circulating sign of the pervasiveness of a civil service ethos, even as it addressed a failure of this practice.

Bseiso’s complaint was about a habit of negligence, a disorderly practice. Other bad habits appeared more proactive—sins of commission, as it were. Abu Jamal, who worked in the Gaza Municipality water department, contrasted the work of his department with that of other civil service sites in terms of routine. Adapted into Arabic, routine indicates inefficiency, bureaucratic red tape, and a use of procedural mechanisms to obstruct the citizen’s efforts to receive services, rather than suggesting something like an organized work schedule or a regular following of procedure: “We as employees offered services to the citizens and were efficient in our dealings with them so they would feel comfortable and not annoyed by routine. There were departments which operated by routine—for example, they said to the citizen to come tomorrow or after tomorrow, but we were serious in our job, and we respected the public and the public was satisfied.” In Abu Jamal’s view, relying on routine showed one to be neither serious nor respectful. While he distinguished the work of his department from that of departments who did not effectively serve the public, there was an evident risk to the entire apparatus of authority if the latter were perceived as representing the civil service milieu. This risk, which could also undermine the status of civil servants, was one reason that identifying and denouncing bad work was so important.

Bad habits are no less complicated than good ones, and there were many possible reasons that a civil servant might not appear serious in his work. In one of the few conversations in which a civil servant reflected on his own practices with the same critical eye generally directed at colleagues, Bahat Hassan described some of the difficulties involved in being a good civil servant. Bahat, who worked during the Administration as a market inspector charged with ensuring that merchants were pricing items according to government regulations described the negative effects of was塔 (connections) on his work habits. He highlighted the ways in which it interfered with his
capacity to do his job fairly and effectively. Bahat’s comments also indicate another side of social differentiation vis-à-vis civil service: those circumstances in which the civil servant approached a private citizen from a position of lower, rather than higher, status. Wasta, in this context, operated as the negative side of social authority, differentiating among civil servants on the basis of family origins or personal connections. Personnel authority did not, and does not, always trump personal authority, a reminder of the complex field within which authority is articulated.

In response to my question about what he did when he discovered someone was not in compliance with the official prices, Bahat responded, “I will answer you frankly. What I did is what happens now. I am from a weak family. If I found that he was from a weaker family than mine and he couldn’t hurt me, I would punish him. If I found that he was from Hillis, Shawwa [powerful families] . . . I couldn’t do anything to him, I could only notice. Because, my back wasn’t covered. . . . I wanted to eat, to continue to eat.”

The amount of attention accorded to pricing violations in police records from the Administration suggests that this sort of civil service failure was very likely to have been noticed by the general public. A report from 1962, for example, indicates that merchants were raising prices on basic commodities and states that “people are asking the government to intervene and stop merchants from exploiting them.” People I knew in Gaza remembered the prevalence of corruption: “The needs of the people were achieved by wasta. There began to be a style that we hadn’t seen before—bribes—a merchant who wanted to import had to pay something. . . . Someone who wanted to resolve a problem—even if he wasn’t in the right—could get a good outcome.”

Bahat’s failure to do his job was, as he certainly felt, a serious matter. He was both frustrated by and resigned to this bad habit of Gazan life. His comments describe more than his personal failures and frustrations though. They reveal how the different obligations and duties of service could come into conflict. In his work as a market inspector, Bahat had to choose between fulfilling his duty to himself and his family and pursuing his duty to the community as a whole. That he was confident in his inability to actually fulfill this latter duty when faced with a well-connected malefactor seems to have made his choice easy, though no less troubling to him. Whatever the
On Being a Civil Servant

Public Perspectives on Civil Service: Habits of Complaint and Comment

As the public outcry about overpricing confirms, muwazzafin were not alone in viewing civil service as a duty. Public attitudes toward the civil service shed light not just on how its practices played among the broader population, but also on people’s ways of interacting with government and its servants. That Palestinians were quick with their commentaries about civil service practice suggests a view of government as potentially responsive to public needs. The content of the commentaries implies that belief in the importance of respectability was widely shared, as it was in these terms that complaints were often forwarded. The terms and tone of complaints did not necessarily pose a challenge to the authority of civil service or its habits. Like civil servants’ own accounts of corruption and inefficiency, by calling attention to particular failures as the problem, public complaints may sometimes have further consolidated bureaucratic authority. Some complaints, though, did point to the possibility of systemic problems, suggesting that failure might not be only individual.

During both the Mandate and the Administration the Palestinian press evaluated civil service performance, critiquing muwazzafin’s professionalism, efficiency, and effectiveness. In the newspapers of each period one can find examples of both praise and complaint. In May 1935, for example, al-Difa’, a paper published in Jaffa that was widely read in Gaza, complained about the behavior of employees of the customs department: “It has come to our attention that these employees come late for their shifts, which is causing negligence and delays in their dealings with people.” In this case, the complaint was not about merchants, but on their behalf. It was frequent practice in the press to report and champion public complaints about government practice. The choice of which complaints to highlight no doubt reflected the paper’s readership, a readership limited by class and literacy. This particular complaint illuminated the network of relations—between employees, their superiors, and the public—which constituted the civil service. Reflecting on the negligent behavior, the article asked, “Could this be true? And, if it is true, who is responsible for these actions, we wonder?” The piece ended with
this question, further underscoring the importance of a well-functioning bureaucratic apparatus for the inculcation of proper civil service values in individual employees.

Similar techniques were employed in press articles which praised civil servants, sometimes defending them in the face of mistreatment by their superiors or misunderstanding by the public. The press, after all, did not simply reflect public views of the civil service, but participated in creating those views. In the early days of the Egyptian Administration, a new Gazan newspaper, *Sawt al-‘Uruba*, published a panegyric to the Gazan civil servant. The commentary praised Gaza’s employees for doing their job well and for defying expectations. The article recounted a story told by a Quaker volunteer (the Quakers provided relief in Gaza before the establishment of UNRWA), “who expected Palestine to be like unknown Africa.” Comparing Gaza’s civil servants to those in Jordan, the man explained that it had taken him a long time in Jordan to complete his paperwork, but in Gaza “they asked me to sit in a chair and they offered me cigarettes and coffee. And, in five minutes—without connections—they completed what had taken four days in Jordan. God bless all the civil servants of this region because they brighten the image of their country.” In doing their job well—being respectable and efficient, doing their duty, and showing sympathy—these civil servants were not only mediators between government and the public, they were the face of their country to a skeptical foreigner. In praising this work, the press contributed to the consolidation of their authority.

Petitions submitted to government by individuals further underscore how widely shared ideas about civil service quality were. A complaint sent in 1945 to the director of the land registry about two of its employees in Gaza mobilized general ideas about civil service character to respond to a particular circumstance of misbehavior. The petition alleged that the employees were letting down both the public and the government, noting that “it is the duty of a Government officer to serve the public interests and to be faithful to Government.” Pulling out all its rhetorical stops, the complaint commented on the reputation of the civil servants in question among Gazans: “Last evening I was sitting in the ‘Al-Nuzha’ Café in Gaza where I over-heard some of the people discussing the ill reputation of the Registrar of Lands Gaza and that of the Chief Clerk Habib El-Sayegh and how those officers
are actually committing shameful acts in over-loading the poorer classes of the public by imposing on them exorbitant fees because they do not give them bribes and how, in return of bribes they receive, they subject Government to heavy losses in fees.” Positioning himself as an unconnected bystander who merely happened to overhear this talk and was concerned for the sake of good government, the complainant urged that the director come to Gaza at once to investigate. I can’t comment on the veracity of this complaint (the registry did not believe it to be accurate), but it discloses the widespread currency of the categories through which civil servants defined themselves. Character and practice, reputation among and relations with the public, duty to government and citizenry—all of these terms according to which the land registry employees were criticized, were those through which civil servants recognized themselves.

The same criteria were invoked in Administration-era complaints about civil servants. When, in 1958, a group of students complained to the director of the Interior and Public Security about their teachers, they relied on shared conceptions of appropriate civil practice in their claim that the teachers’ behavior was outside its boundaries. In their letter, the students said, “We would like to inform you that some of our teachers evidence bad morals and set bad examples. They break the fast of holy Ramadan by smoking and eating in front of the students—in addition to other disgraceful acts.” A police investigation determined that the charges were true—the evident explanation for such behavior being that the teachers in question were Communists. Such an ostentatious display of political affiliation was definitely at odds with the prevailing understanding of appropriate civil service behavior (not to mention the general security climate in Gaza). Accordingly, the security forces ordered the education director to take disciplinary action against the teachers.

Regulating Civil Service: Politics and the Repose of Habit

The complaint about civil service practice involving Communist misbehavior raises the curtain on politics, the arena that posed the most significant potential challenges to civil service habit. The severe restrictions that the governments of both the Mandate and the Administration placed on political activity by civil servants indicate their awareness of the risks posed by
such expression. Consequently, civil servants were prohibited from fully participating in the public life of their communities. For these employees, at least as far as politics was concerned, there was no available realm of private conduct. The restrictions, as much as political participation itself, created tension in service habits.

This challenge was not to the idea of service, but to its enactment, threatening to destabilize the ability of civil servants to be comfortably “reposed” in habit.\(^6\) The political realm had the potential to create doubt, discomfort, uncertainty, which could undermine the stability of civil service. Such doubt could also be threatening to civil servants’ sense of self. As William Connolly notes, “To become severely disaffected from that which one is called upon to do in work, family, and consumption is also to become disaffected from the self one has become. When the distance between what one is and what one does is great, one is likely to hold oneself in contempt.”\(^6\) Given the expansiveness of the civil service persona, which was deeply connected to how civil servants understand their persons, this threat was very real in Gaza.

It was in the political domain that questions of legitimacy might be raised—despite a general practice that held them in abeyance—that in turn might undermine authority. Habit is tenacious, though. The recollections of civil servants about how they maneuvered through these challenges indicate that the abeyance of legitimacy was not a policy simply imposed from above (in fact it very often may have been at odds with policy initiatives), but a practice that made things work, however tenuously, for all those who participated in the governing process. The second part of this book, which explores the details of bureaucratic service, further illuminates this practice. There were clear moments of rupture in civil service habit over the fifty years under consideration here, instances in which abeyance seemed to fail. The first Israeli occupation of Gaza in 1956 was one such instance—and many civil servants seemed to have stayed at home for those four months.\(^6\) More often, though, politics produced a shudder of doubt which was then reabsorbed into the habits of bureaucratic practice.

**Choosing Work and Prohibiting Politics in the Mandate**

During the British Mandate, civil servants were categorically forbidden from engaging in political activity of any kind. As unsurprising as this restriction
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was, given the importance of controlling the national conflict in Palestine, it shows some of the inherent difficulties involved in the Palestinian experience of working for the Mandate government. Constantly negotiating the restrictions of one’s employment and the sentiments of one’s nation created tremendous tensions for civil servants. Retirees described their work as having been for the benefit of their people, and yet they felt frustrated by their inability to publicly express their support for this cause. Qasim Jamal, a former teacher, described the position of civil servants. Each one, he told me, knew he had made a choice: “He had two options, either to do the work he had accepted or, if he got involved in politics, they said, ‘Bye-bye. You chose politics.’ Then, maybe he wouldn’t find any other work. Job opportunities were limited, and most of them were government positions.”

The two kinds of duty—to nation and to family—through which muwazzafin invested their work with import appeared to be in conflict.

How were civil servants able to cope with this conflict? How was doubt put to rest? Civil servants appear to have utilized two primary mechanisms to maneuver among their conflicting demands: subterfuge and disassociation. Through subterfuge—and by taking some risks—some civil servants were able to find ways to participate in political life. Hanan, who could afford to take greater risks than those dependent on the income their jobs provided, managed to write secretly for the nationalist cause even as she worked as a teacher: “I wrote and signed my articles in my sister’s name . . . Istiqlal [Independence]—our names inspired what was inside us. Inside school I didn’t do anything. . . . I obeyed them at work. They allowed me to broadcast on the school public address system, but to speak only about cultural things, not politics. . . . So, I falsely signed my writings.” Hanan seems to have created two distinct realms in her life, and she was able to feel positive about both, indeed, to believe in her work in both.

Even civil servants who could not afford to risk such subterfuge were able to take some comfort in the disassociation such divisions allowed. Civil servants distinguished between their work in government and government itself, drawing a line between British policy and Mandate service delivery. Yasmin, a retired teacher, expressed this sentiment: “We never felt we were working for the government.” When she said this, I thought she meant that work in education was different. When I asked, she insisted, “[No,] work in
the government does not mean that all civil servants are spies for the government or collaborating with the government.” Qasim Jamal echoed these sentiments and explained when and how civil servants might be thought of as collaborators. A civil servant, he said, “felt that he provided services for the citizens, whether he was an employee in health, education, or public security. Except for public security—if he had to enter into matters which were considered against the nation. Then it would be said, ‘This man is political, he’s from the mabahith [CID].' And people talked against him. But, this didn’t happen a lot.” Thus, even as civil servants chafed against the restrictions imposed by the British on their political activity, they were largely able to keep this frustration separate from their valuation of their work and service.

The kind of separation described by Yasmin and Qasim was enabled by the very habits that political restrictions disturbed. These habits, which were not grounded in a particular government or policy agenda, were identified as more fundamental to the work of civil service than that agenda. It was when one’s work was directly implicated in the pursuit of objectionable policies that it became difficult to disassociate. Such disassociation did not entail creating a division between practice and belief or between official and hidden transcripts. Even as all sorts of divisions were demanded of civil servants, both by the conditions of their employment and by their efforts to take part in the life of their communities despite those conditions, such divisions do not comprise a map of the “truth” or “falsity” of people’s positions. In the process of making themselves feel better about their work and defusing the challenge politics posed to their own comfort, civil servants contributed to the consolidation of governmental authority.

NATIONAL SENTIMENTS AND POLITICAL CONVICTIONS: EGYPT, UNRWA, AND CIVIL SERVICE PRACTICE

During the Egyptian Administration, control of civil service political activity was affected by Egyptian concerns about politics “at home” and regionally and by the sometimes uncomfortable relationship between the Administration and UNRWA. The control of political activity in Gaza, which went through several distinct stages in the course of the Administration, mirrored what was happening in Egypt itself. The most important parties on the local scene were the Muslim Brotherhood and the Communist Party. The Mus-
The Muslim Brotherhood was especially popular since Egyptian members of the organization had fought for Palestine during the 1948 war. After the war, however, the party was banned by the Egyptian government.69

In 1952, after the Free Officers’ revolt, which overthrew King Farouq and ultimately gave Gamal Abdul Nasser the presidency, the Muslim Brotherhood was legalized again. For the next two years it was extremely active and drew much of its membership from the ranks of the civil service. Rema Hammami notes that “the head of the movement until 1954 was the head of the Gaza Municipality and also a shari’a court judge. Other leaders were also employees in the Gaza Municipality or school teachers.”π≠ The attempt on Nasser’s life by a Muslim Brother in 1954 transformed the government’s relationship with the group from one of cooperation to one of repression. This second banning of the movement, and the departure of much of its leadership, reduced the organization’s strength considerably.π∞

If 1954 marked the low point for the Muslim Brotherhood, 1958–59 proved to be that moment for the Communist Party. While Communist support for the partition of Palestine had antagonized the Egyptian government, during the mid-1950s there was a “thaw in communist-regime relations”π≤ such that, in Egypt proper at least, jailed party members were released and greater activity was possible. The Iraqi revolution of July 14, 1958, and the increasing rivalry between Nasser’s Egypt and the communist-supported regime of Abd al-Karim Qasim ultimately led to a crackdown on communists in Egypt, Syria (at the time part of the United Arab Republic), and Gaza.π≥

The Gazan membership of both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Communist Party had included many civil servants, though after the crackdowns most were afraid to be involved in politics. Still, according to Hassan Rashad, some continued to be active: “The civil servant was afraid. . . . Other than teachers, most civil servants did not participate in political activities, but teachers did. They were active with either the Communist Party or Muslim Brotherhood.”π∂ Police reports from throughout the Administration support Hassan’s contention, indicating that the Communist Party had quite strong support.75 There was also continued mention of Muslim Brotherhood support among teachers as well as support for the Ba’th party.76 All political activity was closely monitored, and the threat not only of dismissal but of prison hung over any civil servant who remained active.
Ibrahim Mahmoud was imprisoned in 1959. He explained that the government arrested anyone who expressed a political opinion: “We had made a group who defended the homeland and the land. We pressured the Egyptian government to bring arms and recruit. . . . they accused us of being Communists even though none of us were. When we disturbed them, they accused us of being Communists and put us in the military prison. . . . We remained isolated in the prison without trial. I stayed there for twenty-one months. [The group was made up of] teachers and others, but the majority were teachers.” Despite this experience, Ibrahim continued to speak positively about aspects of Egyptian rule, insisting that “not all the Egyptians were bad.” Even more striking than Mandate civil servants who evaluated their own work as being good while disparaging the Mandate, Ibrahim disassociated the service work of the Administration from its political repression: “In the education field, we respected all the Egyptian teachers because prominent scholars and professors were among them, so why should we express our antagonism against them. They [the teachers] did not interfere in politics but only in education—they gave us lectures in literature and morals. The educational apparatus was good. In the health field, there were good Egyptian physicians. . . . Politics was something else.” In fact, despite the repressive aspects of Administration rule, most Gazans described this time as the golden age for Gaza. The uniformity of this judgment hints that disassociation was an effective tool for mitigating frustration with political repression.

The Administration did recognize the necessity of affording Gazans an outlet for political and nationalist expression, however controlled. The legislative council and the Arab National Union were intended to provide such an outlet, but also to build further support for the Administration and the Nasserist project. Even if the union did not really represent a space of political freedom, it was still too political in the eyes of UNRWA, and the organization prohibited its employees from joining. This stance created a conflict with the Administration, which sought to encourage widespread participation. It also produced an alliance between the Administration and Gazans who, despite its limitations, were eager for opportunities to organize.

In September 1959, the agency issued a staff circular that highlighted the importance of political neutrality among its employees:
In accordance with the established principles and practices of the United Nations, staff members are required to maintain at all times—in both their official and their private conduct—the independence and impartiality which is implicit in their status as Agency staff. . . . Although staff members are not expected to give up their national sentiments or their political or religious convictions and are naturally free to exercise their rights to vote in elections, they shall not make public speeches, or write articles or speeches for publication or broadcasting, or otherwise actively support a particular political party or group of candidates.79

According to UNRWA, to be a civil servant, or at least to be an international civil servant, was to be independent and impartial. Such a view was somewhat at odds with the definition of service as duty—duty to family and to community—that was so important to Gazans. Egyptian administrators couched their objection to the restrictions in precisely such terms. They expressed concern that literal interpretation of the impartiality clause “would require dealing with Israel as a normal country, not an enemy one. The price of working for UNRWA . . . is not that one has to forget one’s nation or one’s consideration that Israel is an unlawful country.”80 Despite the Administration’s efforts and employee petitions to UNRWA, the agency seems not to have been swayed.81 UNRWA employees appear to have managed this conflict in their work in a manner similar to that of Mandate employees, namely, by expressing frustration with and criticism of the agency and its policies even as they saw their own work as in the service of their people.82

Civil Service Associations and
The Defense of Employee Rights

While restrictions on political activity posed at least potential problems for civil servants’ comfort with their work, the efforts of these employees to organize collectively to confront government about work-related problems had the perhaps ironic effect of shoring up the stability of such repose. Civil service associations provided a mechanism for muwazzafin to distinguish themselves from government while remaining inside it. Despite the apprehension with which both Mandate and Administration officials viewed these associations, which seemed perilously close to unions, they ultimately reinforced, rather than undermined, muwazzafin’s connection with government.
They offered a means of expressing discontent without threatening the bases of civil servants’ perceptions of their work or their selves.83

Civil service associations were moderate in their politics and conservative in their methods. Even as they appealed for better working conditions and made complaints about government practice, they consolidated a shared sense of civil service identity based precisely on their relationship with government. As Mary McGuire comments about civil service organizing in the United States and Germany, “At every step of the way the vast majority of organized postal civil servants organized within a perception of themselves as civil servants—with all that meant in terms of their duty, responsibility, obligation, honor and loyalty as servants of the state.”84 In Gaza, civil service organizing ultimately confirmed the habits of service.

When civil servants during the Mandate sought to organize, they first had to convince Mandate officials that their organizing was qualitatively different from trade union activity, activity which the government “had found it necessary to oppose.”85 Provisional officers of the new association assured the chief secretary that “the Association will have little or nothing in common with a Trade Union, either in its aims or its methods. It is the chief aim to place before Government the reasoned views of its members and to act only on recognized constitutional lines. It is anticipated that it will render material assistance to Government inasmuch as it will deal mainly with wide questions of the general policy applicable to the Service.”86 With such reassurance, and despite its misgivings, government eventually acquiesced, and an association representing members of the senior civil service was formed, followed by a second one representing members of the junior service.87 There was some continued tension over the political outlook of these associations—the 1944 annual report of the First Division Association complained that they were still sometimes described by the government as “the Association of Bolshies”88—but, for the most part, worries that organized activity by civil servants would lead to a disruption of service work proved unfounded. The one notable exception was a strike in 1946 by the Second Division Civil Service Association, an action which produced substantial government concessions.89

In raising questions about the character of the civil service and the nature of its relationship with government, widely held notions about the propriety and respectability of civil servants were confirmed. In response to a First
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Division Association request, J. W. Shaw, the chief secretary, commented, “I agree . . . that it is desirable to foster a spirit of greater cordiality and cooperation between ‘Government’ (what are all these civil servants if they are not ‘government’?) and the Civil Service (1st Division) Association and for my part I am prepared to do my part to achieve this.” Shaw further confirmed that civil servants had a “‘special’ relationship to the state” when, in response to another association request, he stated, “I was in favour of complying with the request coming as it did from a responsible body of Government’s own servants which was a different thing from dealing with the General Public.” Civil servants themselves certainly concurred with the idea that they were different from the general public. To cite one instance of an explicit statement of this difference, the First Division Association president reported in 1945 on his efforts to get better car insurance rates for members. He suggested that special consideration was likely to be forthcoming because “civil servants as a body are generally quiet and careful people and not likely to go rushing all over the roads to the injury of innocent passers-by.” Even as civil servants confronted government, they reinforced their distinction from the general population and their identification as government employees.

The civil service associations during the Administration—here divided not by level (first and second division), but by employer (government and UNRWA)—continued to be an outlet for personnel frustration that served to buttress the repose of civil service habit. The two associations were not identical in style, though. The UNRWA employees’ association deployed a somewhat more confrontational tone in addressing its employer, calling personnel policies it disagreed with unfair and unjust and at times even raising the threat of political activity. In a letter to the agency director complaining about the cost of living in Gaza, the association’s executive committee warned of trouble if salaries were not increased: “You may consider that this Committee shall not certainly be happy to see that this untolerable [sic] state of affairs should thrust staff members into such attempts aiming at expressing their unrest as it is felt that they can no longer endure any further patience in this respect.” The threat of unrest was not entirely idle, as on several occasions UNRWA offices had been the object of the local population’s wrath, but the association seems not to have ever resorted to such measures.
The government association did not employ such threats, even for rhetorical effect. The extent to which civil servants internalized the restrictions on political activity and fit them into their sense of their own identities is evident in the ways people remember their work in the association. Abu Sami, a onetime head of the government civil service association insisted that they “had nothing to do with politics, only civil rights.” As he put it, the association “did not interfere with the basic laws, but only in personal rights.” He described the association as responsive, not proactive, in its activities, saying, “The association did not get involved in anything just for the sake of proving its existence. It was just a means of defending the rights of the employees when needed: demanding promotion, raises, etc.” The association, he seemed to suggest, was always respectful in its interactions with government and focused on doing its duty to its members. To be gentle, not aggressive, was also to be respectable and a good civil servant.

Conclusion

That civil service habits were both flexible and reflective contributed to their tenacity. Throughout their careers, and indeed throughout their lives, civil servants made different senses of their work as conditions changed. Even within a given moment, different positions could produce distinct understandings of civil service work and habit. These internal distinctions, tensions, and differentiations worked—by making such habits adaptive—to promote the general significance of civil service habits. Habits illuminate how bureaucratic authority could be engendered and also how it might fall apart. It is a strength of bureaucracy that it can produce its own authority. It is also a weakness that doubt among its personnel can also produce doubt among the population—that it can undermine its own authority when repose in its habits is disturbed. Doubt does not, though, flow automatically from strain or inconsistency or even dissonance. Such contradictions and tensions could be a source of strength for service habits. Doubt arises, rather, when the logic itself seems faulty, when tensions become crises, when contradictions become conflicts. Under acute conditions, doubt can become resistance or rejection. For the most part, habit was an effective instrument for sustaining the civil service apparatus and, with it, the broader authority of rule.